



National Native American Indian Heritage Month 2005

The Native American Marines, Sailors and Civilians of III Marine Expeditionary Force have a long and valued history of commitment to our core values of Honor, Courage, and Commitment. The contributions of our Native American brothers and sisters in arms are a rich part of our Corps' illustrious history.

More than 12,000 Native Americans from various tribes served in the United States military during World War I. The outbreak of World War II brought Native American warriors back to the battlefield in defense of their homeland. In 1945, about 540 of the nation's 50,000 Navajos served as Marines, the majority of whom trained as code talkers and took part in every assault the Marines conducted throughout the Pacific. On Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Peleliu and Iwo Jima, they served in all six Marine divisions, Marine Raider battalions and Marine parachute units, and transmitted messages by telephone and radio in their native language -- a code that the Japanese never broke! They were praised for their skill, speed and accuracy throughout the war. At Iwo Jima, Major Howard Connor, 5th Marine Division Signal Officer, declared, "Were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima." Connor had six Navajo code talkers working around the clock sending and receiving more than 800 messages, all without error during the first two days of the battle.

On February 23, 1945 on a hilltop above a Pacific island, a small group of Marines struggled to raise the American flag at Iwo Jima to claim victory over the Japanese. A 23-year-old Native American Pima Tribesman named Ira Hayes rushed to help his comrades and the event was captured on film. It became one of the most famous pictures in history. That picture was the "Flag Raising At Iwo Jima" and it is Ira's hands that are outstretched to give the final thrust that planted this symbol of American victory.

The Marine Corps' cultural diversity is a force multiplier, and Native Americans have proven themselves time and time again on the battlefield. To date, 24 Native Americans have been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. From the battlefields of the American Revolution to the deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan, Native Americans have shown great courage and selfless dedication to our nation. One such patriot is 21-year-old Corporal Kelly P. Baker from New Town -- a city inside Ft. Berthold Indian Reservation in North Dakota. He is a third-generation Marine and descendant of the affiliated Great Plains Tribes -- the Mandan, Hidasta and Arikara. "I'm very proud to be Native American and following in the footsteps of my grandpa and dad," said Baker during a recent foot patrol with his fellow Marines in the city of Ramadi, Iraq. "They were both Marines," said Baker. His grandfather, the late Clyde Baker, served as a Motor Transportation Operator in the Marine Corps during World War II and fought in the Battle of Okinawa. His father, Hugh Baker, served during Vietnam. "He and my grandpa both got out as Corporals," said Baker.

National Native American Indian Heritage Month is an opportunity for the Marines, Sailors and civilians of III MEF to celebrate the contributions and honor the sacrifices Native Americans have made and will continue to make to our Country and our Corps. I highly encourage Commanders and Sergeants Major to make time to celebrate the contributions of the brave and patriotic Native American men and women, both past and present.

Semper Fidelis,

Joseph F. Weber
Lieutenant General, USMC